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Men's Self-Persuasion Styles in Marital Infidelity: A Qualitative Study

Seyyed Ali Kimiaei[1*], Hamid Darrodi[2*]

1. Professor in Counseling, Department of Education and Counseling Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran
2. Assistant Professor, Department of Counseling, , Faculty of Humanities University of Bojnord, Bojnord, Iran

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Abstract

Abstract

Infidelity is one of the most destructive situations threatening marital life. Gender differences indicate that infidelity, particularly in the form of sexual infidelity, is more prevalent among men. In Joint-Point Centered Marital Therapy, understanding the methods through which infidel individuals persuade themselves to establish and continue extradyadic affairs is a major point of focus in terms of infidelity interventions and pathology. The present qualitative study aims to identify these self-persuasion methods among infidel men. Drawing on phenomenology, it aims to identify the lived experiences of infidel men regarding their self-persuasion style for establishing and continuing extradyadic relationships. Participants include 21 men who, due to their exposed infidelity, visited two selected counseling centers in Mashhad and Bojnord cities. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection; the data were analyzed using Diekelmann's method. After analyzing the interviews, 287 initial codes, 10 concepts, and four categories were identified. These categories reflect four major methods of self-persuasion among infidel men, including generalization, deserving an affair, attribution to destiny, and deficit in marital relations.

***Corresponding author**
Email: Kimiaee@um.ac.ir

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Introduction

Breaking a promise is one of the most destructive factors threatening a marriage, accounting for 25 to 50 percent of divorces (Mark et al., 2011). Research shows that breaking a promise undermines trust and intimacy in couples and has widespread psychological and marital consequences (Marchese Jeanfreau, 2009). Available statistics indicate that about 25% of married men and 20% of married women engage in extramarital affairs during their lifetime (Fincham & May, 2017), with the difference that men are more likely to engage in sexual infidelity and women are more likely to engage in emotional infidelity (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Although numerous studies have examined the motives and predictors of infidelity (Woolley & Koren, 2025), the internal mechanisms that justify such behavior have been examined less thoroughly. In sharing-oriented couple therapy, a new conceptualization has been presented under the title of "the black triangle of infidelity" (Kimiaei & Amini, 2021). The first side of this triangle includes triggers and developmental deficiencies, and the second side refers to environmental opportunities (e.g., the workplace or cyberspace). However, the third side, which is the focus of the present study, is the mechanism that individuals resort to. They persuade themselves to establish and continue extramarital relationships. It is assumed that without this self-persuasion process, even with motivation and opportunity, the likelihood of breaking the contract is reduced. Given the research gap in understanding these psychological mechanisms in Iranian men, the objective of the present study is to identify and qualitatively analyze self-persuasion styles in men with a history of marital breach.

Method

The present study was conducted with a qualitative approach and an interpretive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of men who broke their promises. The population included men who had referred to two selected counseling centers in Mashhad and Bojnord over a period of nine months due to disclosed promises; they were candidates for couples therapy services. Sampling was conducted using purposive and criterion-based method and continued until theoretical data saturation was achieved; 21 men were selected as final participants. Inclusion criteria included being married, disclosing promises, continuing to live together, and not being addicted. The data collection instrument was a semi-structured interview that began with the following main question: What reasons or justifications did you use to convince yourself to establish and continue extramarital affairs? The duration of each interview varied between 60 and 120 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Dickelman's seven-step method was used to analyze the data, which included text immersion, concept extraction, and theme categorization. To ensure the credibility and dependability of the data, the criteria proposed by Nkwake (2015) were used, including allocating sufficient time, confirming information by participants, and aligning the researchers' opinions.

Findings

The demographic characteristics of the participants showed that their mean age was 0.936 years, and the mean duration of marriage was 8.33 years. In terms of education, the degrees ranged from a diploma to a master's degree, and most men (11 men) had diplomas. The type of breach of contract also included sexual, emotional, and combined (emotional-sexual). In the qualitative analysis of the interviews, 287 initial codes were extracted. After merging similar codes and eliminating duplicates, 10 central concepts were formed, which were finally categorized into four main themes. These four themes, which reflect the main styles of men's self-persuasion, are as follows:

1) Generalization: It includes the concepts of "being common" and "changing the context of marital life". Men normalized their behavior by citing that "everyone does this affair" or "the period of traditional commitment has passed".
2) Deserving an affair: It includes the concepts of "pure hedonistic perspective, retaliation, and escape from monotony". In this style, the individual considers himself entitled to establish a relationship to gain pleasure, to take revenge on the spouse's behaviors, or to escape from everyday life.

3) Attribution to destiny: It includes the concepts of "idealization/experience of love" and "emphasis on fate and destiny". By sanctifying the new relationship or attributing it to fate and uncontrollable events, they deny personal responsibilities.
4) Deficit in marital relations: It includes the concepts of "being humiliated by the spouse, weakness in emotional-sexual relationships, and the spouse's dependence on the family of origin". In this style, the inefficiencies of the relationship with the spouse are considered the main license for infidelity.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study, which led to the identification of four self-persuasion styles, revealed new dimensions of the psychology of contract breaking. The first theme (i.e., generalization) showed that men facilitate infidelity by relying on permeable social norms and peer groups. This finding is consistent with research by Coma (2013) and Bicchieri & Xiao (2009), which confirmed the role of social networks and small groups in normalizing norm-violating behaviors. Thornton (2008) also emphasized that social perceptions of sexual behaviors can explain individual motivations. The second theme (i.e., Deserving an affair) reflected patriarchal and hedonistic perspectives. This finding is consistent with the study of Mtenga et al. (2018), which showed that men consider themselves entitled to fringe benefits due to their economic status. The concept of retaliation in this category is also consistent with the findings of Warach et al. (2018) and Meston and Buss (2009), who considered breach of contract as a response to the spouse's (real or perceived) infidelity. Regarding the third theme (i.e., Attribution to destiny), the results showed that idealizing the new relationship and attributing it to fate is a mechanism for reducing the burden of guilt. This finding is in line with the theories of Depa (2019), who considered infidelity as a ground for romantic love, and is also consistent with the classification of "random encounters" by Weeks and Fife (2014), in which the individual does not accept responsibility for the behavior by relinquishing control (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2017). Finally, the theme of deficit in marital relations, which was the most frequent, confirmed the classic models of marital satisfaction. Gemmer's (2013) investment model and Buss et al.'s (2017) spouse switching hypothesis emphasized the role of unfavorable communication patterns and unmet sexual and emotional needs (Oppenheimer, 2007) as antecedents of infidelity. It is concluded that contract-breaking men use a combination of cognitive distortions (e.g., normalization and entitlement) and relational realities (e.g., marital weakness) for authorization. It is suggested that therapists in a collaborative couples therapy approach increase clients' accountability by challenging these self-persuasion mechanisms. The main limitation of the present study was the lack of differentiation between types of contract-breaking, which is suggested to be considered in future research

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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